

Half Life 2: Challenger

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Summary: Christine wakes up in the resistance town of Ravenholm, without memory of how she got there. As the Combine step up their attacks upon the resistance, she must flee in order to survive . . .

## 1. 7 Hours War

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\*\*Author's Note: Events described during the 7 Hours War is merely speculation, and is completely arguable.\*\*

The Black Ops assassin leaned over the balcony, one hand on a .357 Desert Eagle. In the street three stories down, two Crab Synths were butchering a squad of marines. The marines, all wearing masks and green-and-black fatigues, scrambled over abandoned cars and trucks. The synths knocked the vehicles away with their sharp mandibles; some of the cars were thrown right into the humans, sending them through the broken glass windows of a caf  like cheese through a grater. A mine exploded under the single-toed foot of one of the Crab Synths; the explosion removed the large limb, leaving two smaller ones and another big one. Moments later, the Crab self-replicated the limb and rebuilt itself. The marines, now in full retreat, fled back up the boulevard and disappeared into the fog of war.

The assassin pulled back from the balcony, and ducked into the hotel room. The bed was unmade, and an open suitcase lay beside a reclining chair. The flickering television displayed a grim reporter standing before a scene of devastation: a skyscraper behind him had been obliterated, and several long pieces could be seen laying a path into the distant. Most of the buildings had been cleaved in two, allowing a view of the chaos behind the reporter: several tall, three-legged and fleshy synths were carving a path through the city. "At four hours since our newfound enemy teleported onto Earth, the aliens have

deployed a large force of 'walkers', which are engaging allied troops on many fronts -" the reporter's voice became garbled and the image vanished, being replaced by an overhead view of the battle. The camera zoomed in on one of the walkers, and a stream of blue pulse fire rewarded it. The fire missed the camera but hit the helicopter; smoke fogged the picture, but the screams of the camera operator could be heard over the erratic chopping. Suddenly, the television blacked out, along with the overhead lights inside the hotel room. The assassin continued into the dark hallway.

The Black Ops assassin crept passed the elevator and entered the stairwell; two flights down was a door with a picture of a flame printed on it. The assassin opened the door and stepped out onto the fire escape. In the alley below, a flaming corpse provided enough light so the assassin could see a headcrab zombie sprawled against a brick wall and a manhole beneath its feet. The .357 dealt with the zombie; the assassin dragged the body and dropped it in the flames before prying off the manhole cap and dropping in.

With a splash, the assassin landed in the darkness of the sewers. A gloved hand switched the goggles to another setting: night vision, which revealed a bulky figure standing at the other side of the duct. It wore a trench coat and had glowing orange eyes beneath a spherical helmet. It was tall, and held a sort of tube in one shadowy hand. Hearing the high-pitched gasp from the assassin, it raised the tube and received a bullet to the helmet. It stumbled backwards and smacked against a grate, the eyes rapidly dimming. With a small groan, the creature died, and the assassin continued through the catacombs.

The assassin climbed the next ladder it came to, and pushed the manhole open. Immediately, the sounds of explosions, screams, and shouts could be heard topside. Without hesitation, the assassin rolled out into the open, which was a long tunnel with emergency lighting decorating the ceiling. Dozens of civilians and marines were running from something; the assassin turned around instantly, holding the Desert Eagle into the face of another walker-synth. Its three legs were bent, and the "elbows" were above its fleshy "head". The Black Ops assassin holstered the Desert Eagle and began sprinting in one fluent movement. Pulse fire erupted from the synth, and concrete exploded where the shots landed.

Sprinting from cover to cover, the assassin finally merged with the crowd as they fled out into the open street. The buildings here were still intact, surprisingly; the huge blue-ish alien citadel stretched into the sky very close to where they were - even more synths were seen marching around the area. There seemed to be a disturbance on the other side of a law firm on one end of the road, but the smoke from a burning APC clouded the air around it. A long flying synth zoomed overhead; it had a helicopter-like spinning blade in the back, keeping it mobile, and it had two small fish-like limbs towards the front. Just like on the walker-synth, an object resembling a stick protruding from the front. It disappeared behind the buildings, and the crowd let out a collective sigh of relief.

The assassin pushed through the citizens, some of which had realized that the striding walker was

still behind them. Emerging from the panicking humans, the assassin began sprinting towards a law firm at the other side of the beaten

road. The strider synth unfolded itself from the tunnel behind the assassin, pulse cannon still roaring. There was a distinctive noise and a huge purple beam exploded from the synth's head, demolishing a large portion of the street and a nearby McDonald's. The creature disappeared from view as the assassin slipped into the law firm and began maneuvering through the hallways. After trotting past several offices, an emergency exit appeared on the other side of the corridor: the assassin left through it, and immediately stepped into another war zone.

Allied helicopters had deposited several Abrams tanks and a large amount of marines only a small distance from the alien citadel, apparently in a final effort to cut the enemy off at its source. There was a number of felled synth burning at one end of the street, including two of the tall ones, one Crab-Synth, and four Mortar-Synth.

A marine bearing a GB36s assault rifle approached the assassin. "Black Ops, eh?" he said, eyeing the skintight leather suit with a grin. "What do you wan'?"

She told him, gesturing at the citadel. He chuckled, and muttered, "Yeah, good luck with tha'." Louder, he continued, "We have a few APCs and scou' cars up ahead, holdin' off anothah charge of Striders. They'll help you along, but we're not going into there, jus' yet. You bettah get wha' you wan' done, fast, 'cause we'll be artillery bombardin' the citadel in a few hours."

The assassin nodded, and trotted forward, sticking to the shadows. Several marines began yelling and there was a bout of explosion toward the other end of the make-shift camp, but the disturbance was shrouded by the fog. Turning the corner and navigating the debris of a shattered statue, the assassin came to the road block the marine had mentioned. An Abrams tank had rolled up, but most of the scout cars were lying in several pieces. Most of the marines had retreated into the two buildings on either side of the intersection: a dark grocery store with a broken billboard protruding from roof, and a French restaurant with weaponry bristling from every open space. Bits of armor were stacked upon the roof and welded into place around the edges; apparently, the humans had turned then restaurant into a bunker. The assassin entered an alley and opened the emergency exit door and slipped in without alerting the marines; instead of approaching them, she retreated to a the dark kitchen and listened in.

"Another wave of Striders are incoming, sir," reported a young voice.

A gruffer one answered, "Are the snipers in position?"

A third, loud voice, replied, "They are, and have attached the laser designators to the barrels. The helicopters and the planes are ready for the signal."

Gruff grumbled, "The trip mines?"

Youngster said, "Placed, sir. The demolitions tech packed an extra few dozen packages of C4 in 'em, we're callin' it C12, get it, sir -"

Gruff ordered, "Head over to the grocery store, George, and check on them. Where are the Striders now?"

Loudman answered, "Almost here, sergeant. A few Crabs have joined them."

Sergeant Gruff said tiredly, "Have the APCs target them. Maybe if we get enough lead into 'em, they won't be able to repair themselves."

Loudman said nothing, but there was the sound of boots stomping and a door opening and closing. A few moments later, explosions rocked the French restaurant, followed by a long artificial groan. Gunfire erupted from the street. After a few minutes of nonstop explosions, gunfire, and pulse fire, something slammed into the French restaurant. Several more crunches followed, ranging from the French restaurant to the grocery store. The assassins stepped out of the kitchen to see a hole in the ceiling and a black, cylindrical object on the tile. Headcrabs began filing out of it, to the shouts of the marines.

The Black Ops assassin exited through the door she had entered through, and heard the same sound she had heard after exiting from the tunnel with the Strider in it. One of the alien aircraft! Looking around, the assassin saw the synth vehicle fly low, screaming through the street. "Gunship!" someone screamed, followed by the sound of more pulse rifle fire. There were also a dozen small flying synth objects, spherical, and with a rope of tubes and wires coming out the back. They began firing tiny pulse rifles at the French restaurant, and flashing bright lights.

The assassin returned to the alley and took note of the fire escape: the ladder was raised just above her grasp. She stood back and leapt to the first rung, and clambered up the ladder to the roof. Stepping over the armored plates the marines had dropped onto the roof, the assassin crept to the edge of the building. Heavy rain drops began to fall, just as another fleshy flying synth appeared through the fog. It was much wider than the gunship, and didn't have a propelling blade. It had eight spider-like legs, with blue lights beneath them, probably what was keeping it afloat. There were two tail-like limbs on the back of it, and it resembled a flying, alien whale. The legs held tightly onto a Strider.

As the second flying synth passed by the assassin, she jumped onto the fleshy back, and it let out a loud groan. Dropping the Strider like the flying synth had been shocked, it passed over another building opposite the grocery store and climbed into the air. The assassin pulled out two combat knives and stuck them into the brownish back; sparks of electricity and an oozing green liquid appeared from the slices, but the assassin held tight onto the knives hilts. The flying creature spun in midair, almost dislodging the assassin, but the knives held, and the synth dropped back to street level. In a panic, it crashed into the rubble of a car dealer. It let out another piercing groan; the assassin quickly pulled out the combat knives, just as the alien synth began to recover; she jumped off the beast and sprinted to cover as it ascended into the fog.

The Citadel was now much closer, visible through the fog - the Black Ops assassin could hear the sound of machinery below it. She returned the knives to her hilt and pulled out the Desert Eagle as she crept

toward the Citadel. There was purple lighting here, occasionally - the portal storms that had brought the aliens had not yet ended. The assassin approached the Citadel, and soon found that there was a massive trench between the street and the huge alien structure. Many of the small round objects that the assassin had seen at the road block were floating up from it. One appeared right below - and the assassin leapt, planning on trying the same thing against it as she had done against the alien flying synth. She grabbed onto it, and it fell a couple of meters before recovering. It bleeped, and began firing the machine gun wildly as it ascended. After a few straight minutes of this, it ducked into a large opening in the Citadel, and began spinning and bleeping louder. The interior of the alien building was empty, except for a few flying slug-like creatures, which disappeared as soon as the assassin entered. The spherical object she held on to slammed itself against one of the huge walls, and began to smash her fingers against it. The assassin dropped, and landed on a walkway below. She fired the Desert Eagle at the little synth until it exploded.

The Black Ops assassin could see deep into the Citadel from here. There were many, many empty coffin-like pods belted to the walls, and walkways like the one she stood on everywhere. She jogged across the walkway, and entered through a sliding doorway. It felt like a science fiction movie.

Moving deeper into the alien structure, the assassin saw more of the slug-like creatures. Were these the true face of the enemy? After walking for a half-hour without resistance, the assassin came across a huge manufacturing depot. Gunships were under construction by the synth slugs, though most of them were not actually working. They seemed to be overseeing, or advising, the synths. The assassin caught sight of more of the synth-soldiers she had seen in the sewers.

The Black Ops assassin came to another doorway, much grander than the previous few. It opened, revealing what looked like a lab. There were a few more of the slugs inside. They looked to the doorway, but saw . . . Nothing. The assassin was now among the rafters, looking down on the slugs and their experiments. Three struggling humans were strapped to three of the pods she had seen earlier. There was an empty pod, too - the previous occupant was on a stainless steel table, stretched and disfigured by the slugs. Only the head was visible, now - what looked like breathing apparatus melded into its throat, and a suit of black armor around it. One slug took a white, skull-like helmet, and fixed it onto the former human's head. The breathing apparatus was obviously connected straight to the helmet, as it was mirrored on the mask. The helmet had orange eyes.

The assassin, enraged, dropped to the ground, and whipped out the .357 Desert Eagle. The slugs turned, their machine-like arms twitching. There was a clatter, and the assassin looked to the source of the noise: some sort of synth soldier had appeared in the doorway. It had the same helmet of the thing she had seen in the sewers, but without the trench coat. There were tan armor plates on the shoulders, abdomen, and legs, like the Crab Synth, but the rest was fleshy, like the gunship and Strider. It held a long pulsing spear.

The Black Ops assassin fired the Desert Eagle three times, at each of the slugs. She turned the .357 on the synth-soldier, as the slugs slumped against the cold floor. She fired three more bullets; two

bounced off the armor, while one punctured the fleshy chest. The assassin reloaded and backed up as the synth soldier stumbled, then leapt into the air, landing right beside the assassin. It swung the spear, knocking the Desert Eagle to the ground - then, it brought the spear around again and stabbed it right into the assassin's stomach. She gasped, then coughed, as the synth-soldier dug the spear into the wall. Red mist appeared around the edges of her vision, as the soldier left her hanging from the wall. Everything went white . . .

## 2. Ravenholm

Christine blinked groggily, and looked around. She was in . . . a train station. On a bench. Blinking, she looked around - there were several humans standing around, most guarding the entrances and exits, and searching the trains. They all held weapons.

"Where am I?" she asked aloud. Nobody answered her, though an old man gave her a sidelong glance. Christine stood, and noticed a briefcase on the bench beside her. The handle had her name printed on it. Heaving the heavy object, she walked over and sat down next to the old man, who was reading a newspaper with the title Resistance Bugle. Beneath it, in much smaller type, was the message: "THE ONLY RESISTANCE NEWSPAPER, THE ONLY RELIABLE SOURCE". Beneath it, the cover story read: "CITY 13 OBLITERATED: Citizens Ruthlessly Slaughtered".

"I didn't see you get here," said the old man, barely moving his lips. Christine jumped.

"Oh, really? I don't remember getting here," she replied. "Where are we?"

"Ravenholm," he whispered, but did not elaborate.

"Where's Ravenholm?" she asked simply.

He set the newspaper down, frowning. "Listen, young lady, this may be a resistance town, but that doesn't mean you can just talk freely and loudly! The Combine could be listening!" The old man gave Christine an angry look, and went back to his newspaper. She stood up and walked through a turnstile, and entered a waiting room. A young woman was dispensing coffee and peanuts to a number of new arrivals. Christine sat down, and the lady gave her a happy grin. "Only found in Ravenholm!" she said cheerfully, offering a package of nuts and a Styrofoam cup of coffee. Christine accepted, nodding at the woman, who scurried away.

An Asian man in a blue jumpsuit sat down on the other side of the table. He also seemed happy, and he said, "Great to be in a town not oppressed by the Combine, eh? I just came from City 17, and you should see all of the CPs! Where are you from?"

"I don't know," Christine said truthfully. "I seemed to have just showed up here. What's a Combine?"

"Hmm," said the Asian man, sipping coffee. "Where have you been?"

"Like I said, I don't know."

"The Combine are a bunch of aliens that came in a few years ago and enslaved us humans," he explained happily.

A brief flash of images appeared in Christine's mind. "A 7 hours war, right?"

"Yup," nodded the Asian man.

"What has happened since then?" Christine asked, eyeing the peanuts suspiciously.

"A crap load," he said with glee. "The Combine established an Overwatch - a group of modified humans that the Combine uses to keep the humans in line. The CPs I mentioned are a big part of them."

"Where are they now?"

"Ravenholm is a resistance town. The only Overwatch you'll find around here are dead ones."

"The Combine don't know about Ravenholm?"

"Of course! If they did, this place wouldn't be a resistance town - it'd be a nest of zombies!"

Christine remembered the zombies. Before the 7 hours war, there had been portal storms that had released aliens onto Earth, including headcrabs. They latched themselves onto the heads of humanoids, and created zombies. "Are the Combine headcrabs or something?"

"Nope, they use shells that deploy headcrabs." He sipped his coffee again.

Christine nodded, thinking. Suddenly, she remembered the suitcase and pulled it onto the table. "This was by me when I woke up."

She opened it. Inside was, surprisingly, a .357 Desert Eagle and a stack of papers. Beneath the papers were several magazines of ammunition for the .357. The papers just had personal information. Where had this stuff come from?

Closing the briefcase, she reached out her hand to the Asian man. He shook it. "Christine," said Christine.

"Jeff Royle," said Jeff Royle. "We might as well head into town, right? We'll probably be here for a while."

The pair headed through the security station, where the resistance soldier simply poked the Desert Eagle and grinned. Finally, he said cryptically, "Black Ops, eh?"

"No," Christine raised her eyebrow at him, before Jeff hurried on. She followed him into a food court, and out into the bright sunshine. Ravenholm was a beautiful town; Christine could see a busy market, a warehouse, a water tower, and a church.

"The resistance are using this place almost exclusively as an HQ.

There are also a few laboratories the resistance is using to construct a better means of travel - less dangerous, you know." Jeff led them through a maze of alleys and brick roads, until they reached the town square. They trotted down main street; resistance soldiers toted SMGs, some sort of large rifle, and shotguns leaned against walls and talked beside a cafÃ©. There were also many weaponless citizens.

Jeff led Christine into a tenement block, and into an apartment building. There were several humans inside, all looking very cheerful. They ate and lounged in the lobby; the pair moved through and up to a desk. The aging woman in the seat behind it looked up with tired eyes and gave them an offer; the apartments were surprisingly low-priced, given the number of people Christine had seen. She inquired about this to Jeff; he told her that the resistance didn't need money, because they grew their own food in the neighboring farms and acquired their weapons from warehouses and dead Overwatch. "And those are the only important things in life," he joked, showing Christine to her room. There was a small, ancient television and a few recent newspapers on a dusty red recliner. A small bed with a smelly pillow and scratchy sheets was shoved up against a corner. There was a bathroom with a clean toilet, sink, and small shower. A note in scrawled writing was stuck to the mirror: Towels, sheets, blankets in closet. Breakfast at 7 AM. Need money? Talk to Monet. Christine blinked, and shoved the note in her pocket before stepping out of the bathroom.

There was a door beside the bathroom that led into the other apartment room next door. Jeff knocked a few minutes after Christine settled, and told her he was going into town to stock up on food for the both of them. Christine thanked him, and he headed out.

Inside the closet, Christine found several blue jumpsuits she had seen other citizens wear, and a stack of towels, sheets, and blankets, as the note has said. There was also an alarm clock, which now read 4:23 PM. There were two crates with "SUPPLY" printed on the sides, which held medical kits, ammunition, an SMG, and a USP Match pistol. Another crate held hand soap, shampoo, conditioner, and other bathroom necessities.

Closing the closet door, Christine knelt by the television and turned it on. The first channel had a white-haired man with a beard and mustache ranting on about the suppression of the reproductive cycle. Disgusted, Christine switched the dial. The next channel had resistance reports coming in from multiple cities, and Ravenholm newscaster showed clips of the Overwatch, their brutality, and in one case a heated battle between resistance and Combine soldiers. The reporter on the spot explained that the battle was occurring in the remnants of City 13.

Christine was surprised by the technology the Ravenholm newscasters had available to them. After showing a brief clip of resistance soldiers flushing Overwatch from a sealed bunker, a 3-D animation of a Combine soldier was shown. The reporter pointed out the bullet-proof vest taken from human sources, which could take significant Submachine Gun fire. It showed several bullets hit the vest with no or little effect. The reporter then commentated, "If we use the enemy's own pulse rifle against them, we get much more significant results . . ." The animation then showed several blue pulses slam into the vest, melting it. "Combined with SMG fire, we

can easily take down the soldiers." Finally, it showed more bullets hit the partly-melted vest, and dig in deep. It showed the blue eyes on the black mask darken comically.

The next channel had a golden "W" in the bottom left corner. Like the animation before, it was now presenting a shotgun. A deep voice said, "Stay tuned to the weapons channel, after these messages from your local resistance sponsor . . ." Christine returned to the Ravenholm newscast, and turned the TV off. She stepped out into the hallway, and took the stairs two at a time to the lobby below. Many of the citizens were just leaving. Christine walked up to the desk lady, and asked, "Where are they going?"

"To church, it's Saturday, y'know."

"I thought church was Sunday morning."

"There's a Saturday afternoon service, hon. Most of the town attends." She didn't remove her eyes from another Resistance Bugle.

"Okay," Christine said, nodding, "Who's Monet?"

"I'm Monet, hon, and its Monay, not Monett."

Christine grinned and followed the citizens into the street. A few minutes later, she arrived at the church, and asked a black man named Leon who the pastor was. "Ah, that's Father Grigori. He's been here since before the war began. Very good man, him."

Father Grigori preached his sermon, mentioning several times the Combine and Overwatch, and to deliver those who had been modified from evil. Afterwards, Christine realized why so many people came: it was like a town meeting. Leon took the stage, and explained grimly that many of the other resistance settlements had been shelled recently. "More shotguns and ammunition are to be handed out to squad leaders, in case of a zombie incursion. If the Overwatch does shell Ravenholm, unarmed citizens should move to the town center, where everyone should be well protected."

A woman named Noriko then went over emergency procedures. While most of the citizens had now moved outside, a few of the newcomers, including Christine, remained inside. "If you cannot get to the town center, you should come to the church, where Father Grigori will lead refugees into the old mine shaft. Leon and I will meet up with the refugees at the old warehouse on the railroad.

"If Combine attack Ravenholm, meet up with your apartment squad leader and board up the doors and windows. Fire teams should hole up in the upper apartments, while remaining squad members stay below. If Overwatch penetrates your apartment, use the supplies and mines located at the rear of every hallway to block the stairwell . . ."

Christine stood and left, getting the idea. The sun was setting, now, and most of the resistance soldiers outside had set bonfires. Some citizens remained, talking with the squad leaders and so on, but the rest had returned to their apartments. Christine couldn't blame them, occasionally, the howl of some alien beast pierced the night. Walking past a bonfire, she overhead one man say, "Damned Overwatch have been

modifying the headcrabs, as well. Heard they've created one that spits poison, and one that moves really fast. I hear the latter ones create really fast zombies, too."

There was a gasp from the assembled citizens. Even Christine felt dread in the pit of her stomach; the real weakness of zombies were their slowness. She returned to their apartment, and asked Monet who the squad leader was. "I am, hon. I suppose you read the notice?"

"Yep," Christine answered.

"Good. Report to me after brekkist, I'll give you a job. Now hit the sack, hon, I don't abide lateness."

Christine headed up the stairs, and knocked on Jeff's door. He poked his head out and grinned. "I assume you went to the sermon? I heard about it from a guy, back at the market, but I think I'll go tomorrow." He opened the door all the way and beckoned Christine in. He was watching the Weapons Channel, and had paper bags of food spread out along the bed. "Take your pick, most of it is just fruit and vegetables. The lady at the store did have some cola they'd nicked off a warehouse, but it was pretty old and really expensive."

Realizing her hunger and thirst, Christine began rooting through the bags. "What else did they have to drink?"

"Water, orange juice, and even some pineapple juice. It's all there."

Christine found two jugs of the pineapple juice and a stack of Styrofoam cups. "Did you get the note?"

"Yeah, and I checked out the emergency supplies at the end of the hallway. They have C4, grenades, Overwatch pulse rifles, hoppers, and a bunch of junk. Monet told me that the stairwell could be blown so the upstairs could be sealed off."

Christine downed two cups of the pineapple juice before returning to her room. Flicking on the TV, she caught a report coming in from a town called Old Large Odessa. The Overwatch had bombarded the town, and the last survivors were holding off a horde of zombies on the rooftops. The reporter, standing on the outskirts of the town, where a firefight could be seen, said, "Troops from Shorepoint, New Little Odessa, Lighthouse Point, and Ravenholm have been dispatched to help quell the infestation . . . With a little luck, OLO could survive the shelling. Sadly, reports of gunships en route to the town have just come in."

Suddenly, there was a crack from outside, and the television flickered. A woman's voice screamed, "We're being shelled!"

### 3. The Town Center

Thunder crackled across the sky, over the dark city of Ravenholm. Dark shapes rained onto the city, crashing through roofs and shattering the streets.

Christine, eyes large, ran to the window. Headcrabs were already crawling from the cylindrical tubes that had barraged the alleys; these were unlike the ones she had seen before. Most had four long, spider-like limbs, and were missing the jaw-like face seen on the normal headcrabs. Once they fell to the pavement, they fled with amazing speed. One headcrab caught a man fleeing for cover; it launched itself on his face and began to suck. He screamed, trying to tug it off, and fell to his knees. Instantly, four other creatures were on him.

There was a crunch from the room next door, and then a pop. Christine ran to the closet, and kicked open one of the supply boxes. Grabbing an SMG, she rolled over the bed and threw open the door with a fluidity that surprised herself. Without thinking, her free hand snapped to the briefcase beside the door.

In the hall, Jeff Royle was firing his own SMG into his apartment room. Smoke fogged the hallway, and debris covered the floor. Christine, holding her MP-7 submachine gun in one hand, and the briefcase in the other, watched uncertainly as a black headcrab appeared in the doorway to Jeff's apartment. It leapt at him, but he kicked it away and loaded it with bullets.

"Head down the stairs!" He shouted at her once he caught sight of her. Christine turned and took the steps two at a time, with Jeff following closely. In the lobby, they found Monet knelt over a woman, with a fast headcrab locked tightly to her face. The woman was still struggling, but sagged as Christine stepped forward. Monet unholstered a .357 Magnum and fired it into the dead citizen's headcrab. It gave a low screech as it died.

"Damn . . ." The old lady said quietly, standing up. "Oh, you two," she muttered, catching sight of the two newcomers. "We're in deep here, y'know. Our best chance is to get to the town center, where the rest of the town should be." The chatter of distant gunfire filled the silence.

"But if we do that," Jeff argued, "Then we'll be trapped in the center. We'll all be killed!"

Monet took a step toward him, and Christine thought she saw a sliver of movement in the crates behind her. "Listen here, you idiot. As long as there aren't zombies, and only headcrabs, we'll be safe in numbers. Leon just wants us to stick together, and you'd better listen to him. He was in the seven-hour war, y'know."

They held a glaring match, and Christine saw the movement again. Suddenly, a fast headcrab leapt from the crates and locked itself on Monet's head. She grappled it, and with surprising speed, swung the creature around and into the wall. It went limp.

Jeff, mouth agape, followed her as Monet stepped out into the streets. Christine went after them, holding the briefcase like a shield.

"Shoot any potential zombies you see," Monet said. "And keep an eye out for these damned headcrabs."

Taking her words to heart, the other two followed the squad leader through the alleys. After a few minutes of running through Ravenholm,

they arrived on main street. They turned towards the city center, just in time to see several thin, skeletal monsters cross a line of mines set up to defend the town center. The mines went off, and the tenement walls collapsed in on the street. There was a cheering from beyond the new wall.

Christine took a quick glance around. Behind them was the church, and beyond that, the coal mines. A long cry split the air, followed by the moans of the wakening zombies.

Monet hesitated. "Okay, we'll go around that. I'll take point; cover my back."

They followed her as she ducked into a side alley and proceeded toward the town center again. Twice, she fired the .357, and twice Jeff and Christine stepped over a bleeding zombie corpse. They encountered no more of the skeletal things that had been destroyed by the mines, and soon arrived at the town center, with the remaining rebels. Leon was standing amongst the medics and the wounded; the soldiers were ushering citizens into a secured tenement building.

Monet approached Leon, and Jeff stalked off, muttering. Christine stared off into the distance, toward the moon, and saw dark shapes scampering over the far buildings. Screams of citizens trapped in buildings and alleys stopped after a few minutes, replaced only by an occasional alien screech or the low groan of a zombie.

Exhausted, Christine sat down cross-legged by a fire, and opened up the briefcase. She pulled out the papers, and inspected the first one. It showed her name, birth date, and had a black smudge over "rank", and "serial number". At the bottom of the list of information was "MIA".

She set the papers back down, pulled out the Desert Eagle, and wedged the SMG in. Christine began to close it, but suddenly caught sight of a trigger located at the bottom of the briefcase. She pulled it, and the other side of the case popped open. Inside was some sort of black leather suit. Laughing at what was obviously a joke from whoever had dumped the briefcase with her, she shoved the full-body garment back into its slot.

Something screeched, much closer to the town center. There was some muttering from the assembled resistance soldiers. Christine stood up, and joined Monet, Leon, and Noriko.

"We should head towards the train yards. There are already some soldiers at the depot on the other side of the coal mine," Noriko was saying.

Leon agreed, saying, "That's right, and they have contact to New Little Odessa and Lighthouse Point there. We may be able to call in reinforcements."

Monet shook her head. "There's no salvaging this city. Have you seen Father Grigori?"

"No," Leon said sadly. "He's disappeared."

Monet laughed shortly, "That old man won't be dead, I can assure ya."

He's a survivor."

One of the resistance soldiers jogged up. "All the citizens are safe. We've barricaded the doors to their sleeping quarters, and have men guarding them."

Noriko nodded. "Get the wounded in there, and barricade them up too. We'll need to stay here for the night, and head out tomorrow morning, at first light."

Leon and Monet looked doubtful. "Can we hold them off that long?" Leon asked.

"I doubt the zombies will be able to get inside. Plus, we'll have guards . . . guarding all night long."

"Okay," Leon submitted. Monet still looked ready to argue, but kept her mouth shut. They trotted off towards the selected tenement, while the remaining resistance soldiers began to carry the wounded inside. Christine followed the party, wondering absently where Jeff had got to.

End  
file.